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Part I

Introduction

Chapter 1

The Controversy over Intentions

Our intentions to say or perform certain acts appear to have an intimate relationship with how people interpret what we are doing. Suppose I ask a good friend *Have you seen the latest Woody Allen movie?* I may have a whole range of intentions and goals that motivate my asking this particular question. For instance, I may intend to engage my friend in a discussion about the movie, I may want to use this utterance as a way of inviting my friend to see the movie with me, I may want to use this question to accuse my friend of not being up on the contemporary movie scene, and so on. But do any of these various intentions play a role in my friend's interpretation of my question?

My friend might simply interpret the meaning of my question about the latest Woody Allen movie not by assessing anything about my specific communicative intentions. She might, instead, determine what my question means from a linguistic analysis of the words in my utterance in combination with her knowledge of English grammar. Perhaps my friend will use her understanding of the context in which I uttered my question to determine its meaning, again, without trying to read my mind as to the intentions behind my question.

Similar questions may be asked about how readers interpret written texts. Imagine that you pick up your local newspaper one morning and see the following headline on the front page: *Drunk gets nine months in violin case.* How might you decide that a reasonable interpretation of this headline is that some drunk person was sentenced to a prison term of nine months in regard to the possible theft of a violin and *not* that some drunk person was

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put *inside* a violin case for nine months? Do you understand what is meant by this phrase merely by analyzing the words' meanings in the context of what newspaper headlines often express? Or do you try to infer something about the possible intentions of the headline writer in phrasing the headline in the particular way he or she did?

More dramatically, imagine that you are reading the famous poem by Archibald MacLeish entitled "Ars Poetica" that begins:¹

A poem should be palpable and mute
 As a globed fruit,
 Dumb
 As old medallions to the thumb,
 Silent as the sleeve-worn stone
 Of casement ledges where the moss has grown –
 A poem should be wordless
 As the flight of birds.

MacLeish may have written these lines to express many ideas. He may have intended for you to understand his vision of poetry as part of nature, or how poetics conveys meaning by spatial language, or even how poems refer to themselves while presenting descriptions of the external world. Once again, you must ask which, if any, of MacLeish's putative intentions play a role in your interpretation of his poem.

This book explores the role that communicative intentions play in people's experience of meaning. My aim is to demonstrate that many aspects of how we understand spoken language, interpret written texts, and make sense of artworks, is to a significant extent influenced by the search for communicative intentions. We do not necessarily seek to recover the specific intentions of the actual person who produces some discourse or artwork. Yet much of what we do when understanding meaning is guided by the assumption that some individual, whom we may not even know, said or created what he or she did for a particular set of reasons that we are to recognize. I will not argue that intentions completely limit both ordinary and scholarly interpretation, but I shall claim that the recovery of communicative intentions is an

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essential part of the cognitive processes that operate when we understand human action of any sort.

There has been continuing debate on the place of intentions in theories of linguistic and nonlinguistic interpretation. On an intuitive level, it makes good sense to describe communication in terms of intentions and inferences about a speaker's or author's meaning. We ordinarily attribute intentions to other people and animals in a wide variety of everyday interactions. Although there has been a great deal of effort given to understanding human behavior in terms of different systems of signs, as witnessed by the study of semiotics, human behavior is predominately conceptualized in intentional rather than physical terms.

The idea that communication exploits the human ability to attribute intentions to other people has always had great psychological appeal. This is seen most forcefully in how we understand utterances in conversation. Imagine a situation in which my roommate says to me one morning *The cat is on the mat*. I clearly interpret this utterance based on my assumptions about my roommate's likely intentions in saying what she did; for example, that she wants me to go let the cat outside. In this way, my interpretation of *The cat is on the mat* is closely tied to my recovery of the speaker's communicative intentions.

Speakers' intentions can be misunderstood, particularly in certain types of communicative situations where people are trying to get their own way (e.g., when making requests, excuses, explanations of behavior). For example, one couple recalled a typical argument in which both maintained that they had not gone to a party because the other had not wanted to go.² Each partner denied having expressed any disinclination to go. In this case, the mixup was traced to the following reconstructed conversation:

Wife: John's having a party. Wanna go?

Husband: OK.

(Later)

Wife: Are you sure you want to go to the party?

Husband: OK, let's not go. I'm tired anyway.

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When the couple later discussed the misunderstanding, the wife reported that she had merely been asking what her husband wanted to do without considering her own preference. She claimed that she was about to go to the party for her husband's sake and tried to make sure of his preference by asking him a second time. The wife felt she was being solicitous and considerate. The husband said that by bringing up the question of the party, his wife was letting him know that she wanted to go, so he agreed. But when she brought it up again, he thought that she was letting him know that she had changed her mind and now did not want to go. So he found a reason not to go, to make her feel all right about getting her way. Thus, the husband was also being solicitous and considerate. This example shows how people can misunderstand the communicative intentions of others even when both conversants were being attentive and polite.

Of course, there are moments in everyday conversation when listeners openly resist acknowledging their recognition of speakers' intentions. A nice illustration of this is seen in Ingmar Bergman's film *Scenes from a Marriage*.³ The couple, Marianne and Johann, have decided to end their marriage and meet in Johann's office to sign the divorce papers. As they talk about their relationship, Marianne says:

Marianne (gently): I want you to know that I'm nearly always thinking of you and wondering if you're lonely and afraid. Every day, several times a day, I wonder where I went wrong. What I did to cause the breach between us. I know it's a childish way of thinking, but there you are. Sometimes I seem to have got hold of the situation, then it slips through my fingers.

Johann (sarcastically): Why don't you go to a psychiatrist?

Throughout the film, Marianne and Johann talk of their sadness over the deterioration, and ultimate break-up, of their relationship. They express their thoughts and feelings in different ways, but both Marianne and Johann collude to ignore what the other is attempting to communicate. In the above scene, Marianne tries to talk plainly of her feelings to draw Johann closer to her, yet Johann

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clearly rebuffs Marianne. This practice of ignoring or deflecting speakers' transparent communicative intentions occurs in many discourse situations. Yet the fact that someone's communicative intentions must be dealt with in some way, even if this means resisting them, reveals the salience of speakers' intentions in our understanding of what is said.

Conversations like the above raise the thorny question, once more, of how best to define what constitutes a speaker's communicative intention. Should we distinguish between what a person communicates quite specifically by virtue of what he or she says from what that person hopes to achieve by virtue of the listener's recognizing the communicative intention? I will suggest that it makes good sense to limit communicative intentions to what speakers say (e.g., Marianne talking of her feelings), and not confuse discussion of these intentions with what speakers (or writers and artists) hope to concretely realize by what is said (e.g., Marianne's hope to draw Johann closer to her as a result of his understanding her communicative intention).

Although intentions seem most transparently at play in face-to-face conversation, they also shape our interpretation of written texts where, in most instances, the writer is not physically present. Our reading of what many texts mean seems inseparable from our awareness of who the author is who penned the work. Reading a letter from one's mother, a best friend, or a lover, creates an experience in which we almost hear the author's voice speaking to us. Even when we don't personally know the author, we struggle to understand a writer's communicative intentions when reading most texts. Consider the following example of a letter to a newspaper advice columnist.⁴

Dear Etiquette Expert:

My girlfriend and I are ready to get married in a few months. She has been hounding me to get an engagement ring. But I don't see why it's so important to buy an expensive ring when it's the love that counts. If two people love each other, why does the man have to prove it by buying her an expensive ring?

This letter illustrates that a writer might have a diversity of

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communicative goals: for example, to get a problem solved, to draw the reader's attention to an issue, to solicit agreement on an argument, to get into print, and so on. Here the etiquette expert has the task of determining which of these goals are primary in order to supply a useful response to the letter writer. Moreover, there are other agents involved in the interpretation of this letter, such as other potential letter writers, readers of the newspaper, the editors and publishers of the newspaper, and so on. Letters like this one are hardly simple and show how, in some cases anyway, understanding what a writer intends to communicate may involve multiple agents with multiple intentions. At the same time, people's interpretations of what a writer says will also differ depending upon their own attitudes and beliefs about the writer. For instance, some readers might think the writer of the above letter is simply "cheap" and unwilling to express his love for his fiancée in the traditional manner. Other readers might have great sympathy with the writer for wanting to place his love for his fiancée above traditional, material values.

There are other cases where we may not personally know the author, but know of the author and his or her beliefs through previous works. In these instances, we often create in our minds a sense of someone familiar talking to us with specific communicative intentions that we are to recognize and appreciate. Consider this example from a popular movie review column, "Joe Bob Goes to the Drive-In," written by Joe Bob Briggs.⁵

So this flick starts off with a bimbo getting chained up and killed by a bunch of Meskins dressed up like Roman soldiers in their bathrobes... Sixty-four dead bodies. Bimbos in cages. Bimbos in chains. Arms roll. Thirty-nine breasts. Two beasts (giants lizard, octopus). Leprosy. Kung fu. Bimbo fu. Sword fu. Lizard fu. Knife fu. Seven battles. Three quarts blood. A 39 on the vomit meter... Joe Bob says check it out.

Joe Bob Briggs's movie reviews are not exactly inspired literature, and to some readers are quite offensive. But many readers recognize the satirical intent of the writer, whose real name is John Bloom, a young Dallas newspaper reporter. Bloom's idea for his column was to review "bad" movies, but to do so from

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the vantage point of a viewer who could discriminate between what was good and what was bad in a “bad” film. As a satirist, Bloom allowed his narrator, Joe Bob Briggs, to talk in his own language in order to target contemporary attitudes about “taste.” Bloom even gave Joe Bob his own special identity as a redneck working man who at nineteen has been married three times and literally seen sixty-eight hundred movies, which gives him great authority as a drive-in movie reviewer.

Of course, like all satirists, Bloom takes an enormous risk in writing this column. Problems soon arose after he started publishing it as to whether the column was making fun of Joe Bob or of the people Joe Bob writes about (e.g., *Meskins*, *Bimbos*, etc). Predictably, some readers view Joe Bob as a Southern cracker being satirized for their amusement, while others, such as the Baptists and some feminists, are offended by Joe Bob’s passion for violence and sex. Yet other feminists get angry at the angry feminists for not recognizing that the column was simply poking fun at the kind of people who go to the types of movies reviewed in Joe Bob Briggs’s column. All of this goes to show how readers’ different views about who an author is, and what that author’s motives are in writing as he or she does, has an enormous influence on how people interpret the meaning of texts. Moreover, it is clear that a reader’s attitudes toward the author and the topic discussed have a great bearing on the interpretations given to any text.

These observations on speech and written texts point directly to the strong conclusion that recognition of speakers’/writers’ intentions play an important part in how we understand language. Over the past twenty-five years, much research in cognitive science – which includes parts of the disciplines of psychology, philosophy, linguistics, computer science, neuroscience, and anthropology – has been devoted to the question of whether intentions have a significant role in the experience of meaning, especially in regard to how people interpret linguistic communication.⁶ Although other approaches to linguistic meaning are widely pursued, such as truth-conditional semantics, it is widely assumed that understanding many aspects of linguistic meaning crucially depends on recognizing speakers’/authors’ intentions. Cognitive scientists have, for example, learned a great deal

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about how speakers/authors express their intentions and how listeners/readers figure out exactly what it is that others wish to communicate. A variety of theoretical proposals and empirical findings suggest that a critical part of the unconscious and conscious mental activities involved in speaking and listening, and in writing and reading, center on the expression and recovery of communicative intentions. Part of my goal in this book is to illustrate that determining the role of intentions in the interpretation of meaning depends on the recognition that speakers/listeners, authors/readers, artists/observers are engaging in cognitive, psychological activities that can be empirically studied and understood.

Despite our strong intuitions, and much of the evidence from cognitive science, that understanding what a speaker, author, or artist means depends critically on inferring something about that person's communicative intentions, there have for decades been fierce arguments in scholarly and public circles about the role of intentions in the interpretation of linguistic and nonlinguistic meaning. *Intentionalism*, the idea that speakers' or authors' intentions place constraints on linguistic and artistic interpretation, has been most widely debated in the humanities. One quote from Peter Kivy nicely captures the fever of the debate over intentionalism: "The mere mention of the word 'intention' in regard to any art-critical or art-theoretical question is liable to elicit, these days, the most violent reaction, as if one had just dropped a snake in a crowded room."⁷

Many literary critics in the early twentieth century argued that an author's intentions place significant constraints on how one should interpret the meaning of any literary work. Thus, readers presumably determine the meaning of the opening lines of MacLeish's poem "*Ars Poetica*" – *A poem should be palpable and mute / As a globed fruit* – based on the recognition of certain intentions that they believe MacLeish wishes them to recover. Readers, especially literary critics, might, for example, try to interpret MacLeish's poem in light of their knowledge of MacLeish, his various life experiences, his pronounced goals as a poet, and so on.

In the 1940s and 1950s, however, intentionalism suffered its first major blow with the rise of New Criticism and its influential

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doctrine, called the *intentional fallacy*, which states that interpretation of texts should be freed from historical and biographical influences.⁸ Thus, when readers formulate a critical interpretation of MacLeish's "Ars Poetica," they should restrict their analyses to the possible meanings *in the text* and neither speculate about MacLeish's possible reasons for writing the poem in the way he did nor refer to any information about MacLeish in passing critical judgment on his poem. With the rise of New Criticism, a whole generation of scholars felt they needed to tiptoe delicately and apologetically around any suggestion that they were interested in authorial intentions as part of their critical analyses of literary texts. As the poets/critics Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot had argued earlier, textual meaning should be independent of authorial intentions because the best poetry is objective, autonomous, and impersonal and should continue to express meaning long after it has been disassociated from the person who wrote it.⁹

From the 1960s to the 1990s other philosophers and literary critics declared their own beliefs in the intentional fallacy. Poststructuralists such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault announced the "death of the author" as a precondition for the desired "birth of the reader" in literary criticism.¹⁰ Though authors may think they know what they intend, their thought and language are at the mercy of socioeconomic, psychological, and historical forces that cause them to mean something other than what they frequently intend. This blindness makes what authors intend far less interesting than the operation of these external forces as revealed in their work.¹¹

Anti-intentionalist theorists and critics have argued that textual meaning can be determined by conducting close analyses of the "meanings in the text," uncovering the hidden political/historical/cultural forces that shape texts, or even deconstructed by recognizing the infinite number of possible meanings that a text can offer in the "endless web of texts past and present."¹² Once again, what an original author might have intended to communicate in writing has little or no value in determining how a text should be construed. Similar claims have been advanced for how critics should interpret artworks, in that what an artist might have